

Book review: #RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa

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Nyamnjoh, Francis B. (2016), *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa*, Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG, ISBN 9789956763160 (paperback), 312 pages

What does it mean to belong? What is the difference between, on the one hand, a “true” citizen, an autochthon, a native and, on the other, a foreigner, an outsider, an invader? How can people learn to see each other as fellow human beings in spite of cultural and physical differences, painful histories, and deeply ingrained feelings of suspicion, resentment, and fear? These are some of the core questions that Francis Nyamnjoh invites us to explore in his book *#RhodesMustFall: Nibbling at Resilient Colonialism in South Africa*, for which he was recently awarded the Fage and Oliver Prize by the African Studies Association of the UK (ASAUK).

In *#RhodesMustFall*, Nyamnjoh examines the history of and motivations behind the “Rhodes Must Fall” (RMF) student movement, which began at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2015 and ended not only with the removal of the statue of Sir Cecil John Rhodes – the most famous (or infamous) British colonial expansionist in Africa – from UCT’s main campus, but with a heightened political awareness among students across South Africa indeed. The various follow-ups to and offshoots of the RMF movement continue to make their mark on South African politics and academic life. Despite its title and point of departure, *#RhodesMustFall* is only partly a book about the RMF movement in fact. On a deeper level, it is about contemporary South Africa, the issue of addressing historical and ongoing injustices in a constructive way, and the challenge of achieving true reconciliation in a nation still suffering from the effects of extensive racial division and oppression.

Nyamnjoh divides *#RhodesMustFall* into seven chapters, throughout which he draws upon a wide variety of sources ranging from academic works, novels, and news articles to films, ethnographic field notes, and oral statements. He starts out by sketching a portrait of Cecil Rhodes in chapter 1, and then continues by discussing the advent of the RMF movement in the context of contemporary race and class relations in South Africa in chapter 2. Subsequently, Nyamnjoh dives deep into the issue of black South Africans’ xenophobia – or, as he puts it, *Afrophobia* – against black Africans from other countries. He discusses how narrow ideas of citizenship and belonging influence South African public life, politics, and academia, as well as the consequences that such notions may have for future decolonisation and transformation (chapter 3).



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In chapter 4, Nyamnjoh discusses UCT's responses to, and interactions with, the RMF movement in the context of black students' experiences – and feelings of inferiority and outsidership – at UCT and other South African institutions of higher learning. Chapter 5 is where Nyamnjoh begins to collect the various threads into one discussion addressing issues of history, race, insidership and outsidership, inequality in academia, and what it really means to be African. Chapter 6 is a fictional account of Nyamnjoh himself (or, more correctly, a hypothetical, counterfactual version of himself). Throughout this text and the subsequent commentary, Nyamnjoh illustrates that, despite the widespread longing for completeness and control, human coexistence always requires a certain degree of hybridity, intimacy, and mutuality too. Chapter 7 is the book's concluding chapter, where Nyamnjoh sums up his main argument.

What is this core view? While acknowledging that the RMF movement's cause – the fight against resilient colonialism – is a *black* one, Nyamnjoh goes further. More specifically, he shows us that it is more fundamentally a *human* cause; a rebellion not only against historical colonialism or apartheid but against any system that brands people as worthy versus worthless, insiders versus outsiders, us versus them. Nyamnjoh calls for true decolonisation, which is not the substitution of one kind of supremacy with another nor a silent acceptance of colonial structures living on in an ostensibly free and democratic country (or university) – neither of which entail any real transformation. Instead, he proposes a fair and just redistribution of wealth and resources from the privileged to the disadvantaged – enabling South Africans to embark on a truly inclusive way of life that transcends hierarchies and dichotomies and where every person's humanness is equally and universally acknowledged.

Nyamnjoh illustrates the paradoxes of identity and belonging through the person of Cecil Rhodes, the quintessential coloniser and white supremacist – who in many ways identified more closely with his adopted African homeland than with the England where he was born. As Nyamnjoh points out, Rhodes's story is not all that different from that of modern-day African migrants coming to South Africa – people often referred to derogatorily as *amakwerekwere* – or even the ancestors of many of those who are currently claiming ownership of South Africa's soil. In the end, very few of us, if any, can truly say that we did not originally come from somewhere else. As Nyamnjoh puts it in the title of his conclusion, "We Are All *Amakwerekwere*."

#RhodesMustFall is a work of creative scholarship in more ways than one. Nyamnjoh excels at communication, bringing his skill as a novelist into his scholarly work. The book provides detailed analyses of very complex topics, yet it is written in a language that is accessible to academics and non-academics alike. This is one of the book's major strengths, along with the sheer richness of its source material. If it might seem a bit difficult to discern a single clear theoretical thread as one reads the book, this is most likely due to the combination of Nyamnjoh's creative bricolage of sources and his delightfully distinctive style of writing, both of which I find to be thought-provoking and extremely valuable. He takes the reader on a journey of exploration – sometimes deep, sometimes playful, sometimes both – through a diverse array of ideas and issues before tying them all together at the end.

What I personally appreciate the most about *#RhodesMustFall* is its underlying message. In an era of division, zero-sum games of legitimacy and belonging, and degenerating intergroup relations in many parts of the world, Nyamnjoh reminds us that humanity is indeed one – and that we have both the duty and the power to overcome the pains and burdens of history and build a better world together. *#RhodesMustFall* is a book of hope. At no point blinded by trouble and despair, it seeks to be part of the solution to some of the most pressing human problems of our age. I heartily recommend it.

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